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Against Zeitgeist and the Systems of Systematizers

Dallin and Breslauer's * methodological approach to their subject is a now familiar combination of elements of structural functionalism and systems analysis. Like all works cast in this mold, the accompanying language tempts one to be impertinent and refer the authors to George Orwell's instructive essay, *Politics and the English Language*.

My strictures against such styles in methodology and language are not politically motivated, nor are they made without regard to the research that lies behind this particular book, which is considerable and frequently useful. As a bibliographic review and analysis of the extant *literature* on political terror in Communist-led politics, it is a very fine reference work, and many of the judgments, posed in a straightforward prose style, are appealing.

My opposition is to a methodology which I see as being inadequate for achieving what its users claim: an accurate portrayal of stages of development, decisionmaking, and their effects on the quality of experience within a given polity. The central weaknesses in this work are not due to any lack of knowledge about the workings of Communist systems of government as such, nor to any personal inability on behalf of the authors to comprehend the more unpleasant aspects of life under Communist regimes. Indeed, one of the great strengths

* See preceding review for bibliographical citation.

that recommend this work highly is the authors' research into these areas, for their knowledge and understanding are considerable. Because this review concentrates principally on the inadequacies of the book, this point should be well noted to the authors' credit.

The weaknesses—and these are partially conceded by the authors—derive from the systematizing, the language (which occasionally borders on the esoteric), and the too easy projection of the present into the future (for the authors' methodological purposes)—all so typical of the genre of which this work is but one example among a proliferating many.

Typically, Dallin and Breslauer claim their weaknesses (i.e., in terms of the methodology) to be ultimate, reinforcing strengths. Take, for example, the following:

This stylized and oversimplified picture [i.e., the outline of their systems-functional approach] assumes that the manipulation of political control can be a rational process, with changes in instrumentalities and processes following changes in goals, available assets, and perceived priorities. To assert such an underlying regularity is not at all to deny that other variables—such as a given political culture, the psychology of an individual leader, intra-bloc and international relations—may intervene decisively to shape particular cases. But it does assume that significant deviations from the "ideal type" are explicable in terms of specific intervening variables in every case [p. 9].

It would appear from this that all exceptions necessarily prove the rule.

The authors consistently qualify their model system, and then qualify the qualifications within the framework and terms of the model so as to negate the negations. The chapter entitled "Dynamics, Dialectics, and Dysfunction" itself constitutes a paradigm of this dialectical method of qualifying the qualifications back into the framework of the model so as to rescue it from its own internal contradictions. There are two exquisite examples of this on pages 116–121; for another, refer to page 140.

Perhaps it is because of the adoption of this methodological device for dealing with data which conflict with the basis of the model that the authors shy away from detailed discussions of specific examples of terror. This is understandable, because the fewer the individual cases that are dealt with, the less the authors are required by their own methodological premises to qualify both their model and their qualifications.

Like all *intellectually* constructed political systems, Dallin and

Breslauer's takes on a life of its own, and a purpose that moves men and events independently of, and on occasion despite, human will. It bears comparison with that specter which has so far eluded captivity, the *Zeitgeist*—under yet another pseudonym, "the dynamics of the system"—with its mysterious cunning, which in negating the negations, in contradicting the contradictions, upholds the systems of the systematizers:

We have seen that the successful operation of the system, and its economic development in particular, generates new tensions, new social forces and alignments, new sources of deviance and dissent. Communist systems have generally been unsuccessful in sealing off their societies, and especially their elites, from the outside world and in "freezing" them in a state of total compliance. Ironically, both the *dynamics of successful development and the stagnation of failure will tend to destabilize what passes for total control* [p. 122, emphasis added].

To take another example of the reliance upon the "dynamics of the system," in arguing against the probability of there being a return to direct terrorist rule in the Communist polities, the authors conclude that

the thrust of our argument has been to show that, despite zigzags and contradictions, the dynamics of the system point in the opposite direction [p. 141, emphasis added].

This is followed by a qualification beginning "we hasten to add . . .," which, in its turn, is dialectically qualified.

One is obliged to ask just what, in precise detail, are the "dynamics of the system"? The authors fail to inform us. Are we expected to believe in the existence of "dynamics" as an article of faith?

These methodological idiosyncrasies—the over-systematizing, the dialectical negations of contradictions, the determining role attributed to the mysterious "dynamics" of history, and the heavy bias in favor of general theory at the expense of exactitudes—suggest that it is not only New Left writings which have become enmeshed in, and mystified by, a too heavy reliance upon residues of High German, Hegelian-Marxian metaphysics, as revealed in so much of the modern "sociological" method.

Dallin and Breslauer's trinitarian division of the stages of development of Communist societies—"takeover," "mobilization," and "post-mobilization" periods—coincides with W. W. Rostow's cate-

gories for economic and industrial growth.¹ In Marxist thought, the categories find their parallel in the feudal-bourgeois-socialist-Communist schema. The very choice of categories reinforces the preconceived conclusion that, despite setbacks and occasional reversions to barbarism, there is an ineluctable process of progressive development. In the present work, it leads to the conclusion in the final paragraph of the book:

When György Fáludi, the Hungarian poet, was sentenced to be executed without cause, he scribbled in his own blood, "Orwell was right." Today we can see better, perhaps, that fortunately Orwell was wrong. Like the Abbé Seyès, the societies that have witnessed the terror have survived to share the future of mankind [p. 144].

There are at least three essential points to be made against this conclusion. First, exactly what was Orwell wrong about? He never predicted the destruction of Communist societies. At no stage in the book do Dallin and Breslauer attempt to delineate Orwell's views about the survival of Communism, nor do they anywhere attempt to prove him wrong. This suggests that this part of the conclusion is rhetorical flourish.

Second, the statement that the societies which have witnessed the terror have survived is elliptical and implies some sort of prescriptive judgment. There are certainly good reasons for arguing that it would have been better for the future of mankind if these societies had not survived at all, for if they had not, many millions of human beings might have been spared torture and premature deaths.

Third, to speak of survival in such terms is no more than a tautological play with words. Of course, all who survive survive. However, the quality of survival would appear to be a much more important question for analysis. The authors' approach glosses over those facts of economic, political, and social development which have made it possible for some people to indulge in the luxury of concerning themselves with the quality of survival while others still have little else to consider than survival itself.

To return to the model. The stages of development mean what the authors make of them; therefore, it is *their* Communist systems that

1. The "mobilization" model of Communist systems is a substitute for the somewhat discredited "totalitarian" model. However, it is even less convincing than the totalitarian model. For a recent and subtle critique of the uses of the latter, see Robert Orr, *Reflections on Totalitarianism, Leading to Reflections on Two Ways of Theorizing*, paper delivered to the Conference of the Australian Political Science Association in Wellington, August 14, 1972.

they are analyzing. Consequently, the validity of the analysis stands or falls on the basis of an individual reader's acceptance or rejection of the model, and not on the more important issue of historical accuracy. As the book is about the uses of terror in Communist systems, and as the analysis is posed within a very restricted but highly rationalized framework, the authors must accept the responsibility—despite their qualifications—for imputing an ordered rationality to the uses of terror and for attributing—through their own systems-functional language—sociological minds to the wielders of terror. All this has the disabling effect of restricting interpretations of the uses made of terror in Communist systems to stages of development and leaves the work open to criticism on the grounds of inadequacies in the model. This has the further effect of distracting attention from discussions of actual situations of terror in favor of discussions about the language and systems of the systematizers. A hostile critic could easily discount the facts about terror because of faults in the model.

A good illustration of this particular defect is provided by Dallin and Breslauer's exegetical use of quotations from a wide range of secondary sources (frequently incompatible both with one another and with the authors' views) to reinforce their own thesis about the nature of terror within the terms of their own systematized approach. They write:

We can only surmise the magnitude of irrational elements, but we believe it to be generally true, as Barrington Moore discovered, that in the view of the Communist leaders, terror is "a rational device to be used 'scientifically.' . . ." Aside from individual instances, there is very little cruelty merely for the sake of cruelty in Soviet terror. The categories of victims are worked out by a crude but nevertheless rational procedure [fn. 1, p. 123].

This categorical assertion obliges one to ask at least the following questions: what constitutes "cruelty," and what constitutes "cruelty merely for the sake of cruelty"? Whatever the answers, and even if the leaders were motivated by a "crude but nevertheless rational procedure," does this necessarily preclude "cruelty"? And is "crude" reason—or, for that matter, any sort of reason—necessarily incompatible with cruelty, as the Barrington Moore usage implies? Further, assuming that reason cannot be "cruel" and that the leaders are men of "reason," what of those who practice the terror? Cannot they be cruel? Stalin, for instance, may or may not have been personally cruel—my guess is that he was—but he certainly did not personally torture, maim, or kill the tens of millions affected by the great terror. The Dallin-Breslauer-Barrington Moore assessment hardly

pays due respect to the arguments, advanced by Solzhenitsyn and Nadezhda Mandelstam among others, that during the period of "prophylactic" terror, it was the wielders of terror who became the fashioners of its nature, and that because terror was the singularly greatest fashioner of the nature of social relations throughout the U.S.S.R. during this period, it was they who became co-fashioners of Soviet society and of the quality and conditions of survival in that society. Even further, one can say that there were millions of individual cases, as there were millions of victims. And what of the assembly-line torturers upon whom the Stalinist systems in Russia and Eastern Europe were so peculiarly dependent for survival? Were they not cruel? Cannot it be said that the systems were themselves cruel systems of government run by men who were, or had become, immune to cruelty?

This leads to the central theme of the thesis, which is that terror in Communist systems is integral to the takeover and mobilization stages of development and becomes less essential to the system, and therefore declines, during the post-mobilization stage:

... as the regime gains widespread legitimacy, the administration becomes bureaucratized, and various mechanisms of socialization are routinized, the leadership can to a greater extent rely on—and, to an extent, manipulate—normative power as well as administrative-bureaucratic procedures and communications, to secure control, and compliance [pp. 8, 9].

and

As Communist systems pass beyond the mobilization stage, the incidence of political terror as an instrument of public policy tends to decline sharply [p. 81].

Here we are confronted with retrospective, anhistorical analysis and with the problem of definitions.

One's acceptance of the statement about bureaucracy is dependent upon an empirical demonstration that the Russian polity in the 1930s was not highly bureaucratized, since this was manifestly the period of greatest terror. There is no attempt by the authors to refute, for instance, Leon Trotsky's arguments that Stalinist Russia was afflicted with bureaucratic degeneracy and Djilas' similar arguments, posited in the *New Class*, regarding postwar Stalinism, also a period of considerable terror relative to the present. If Trotsky and Djilas were right, then Dallin and Breslauer are wrong, and vice-versa.

Further, the argument that the end of the terror coincided with a new developmental stage is most tenuous. It is only valid if all the assumptions underlying the model are valid.

Adequate consideration is not given to the plausible hypothesis that the termination of the "prophylactic" terror was not related to stages of development as such, but was a product of the death of Stalin and of the arbitrary removal of Beria from the scene. In short, that it was not induced by the "dynamics of the system" but by a simple human desire to live without the fear of being arbitrarily and suddenly tortured or persecuted, to live with a greater degree of certainty about the possibilities of planning for life tomorrow.

As this issue is crucial to the Dallin-Breslauer thesis, it requires further consideration. For the sake of argument, let us assume that the "Doctors' Plot" was in fact the prelude to another great purge to be employed by Stalin as a weapon to reinforce the tenure of his own rule, which he once again believed was being threatened by conspiracies. Let us also assume that nobody in the top echelons of leadership was particularly delighted by this prospect. Now, both things are plausible. If this was the case, and there is considerable evidence that things were moving in such a direction, then it would mean that the *raison d'être* of the projected purge(s) was not primarily related to stages of development, as Dallin and Breslauer would be required to argue, but to the survival of the Stalinist system of social control, which had come to depend upon a state of continual crisis. Similarly, the great terror of the 1930s appears to have been related at least as much to the reinforcement of Stalin's power and control *per se* as to "stages of development." In defiance of Dallin and Breslauer, this sort of assessment suggests that the post-Stalin leadership was looking forward to a period of stability, a period of predictability. Having achieved some measure of this, the essential problems that they are now confronted with are not those of post-mobilization growth but those relating to the Stalinist past, which they have inherited along with their power. They cannot deny the whole Stalinist past, for this would deny not only their own claims to legitimacy but also the very legitimacy of the system over which they preside.

This situation is a basic cause of continual conflict and crisis within the Soviet polity. There are those, such as the rulers and their *apparatchiki*, who are prepared to promote only a selective remembrance of things past, pitted against those, such as Solzhenitsyn, the Medvedevs, and other writers and intellectuals, who are endeavoring to reconstruct the whole past on the grounds that a society which destroys memory is insane and sick.

The regime retaliates with the counterargument that if the dissidents were given their way the system would be threatened. Now there is one thing at which the present rulers of Russia are very adept: the art of survival. When one considers that they are the rulers of the world's

largest and most polyglot empire, an empire that is rife with stresses and strains, the question of the survival of the U.S.S.R. together with its Eastern Europe adjunct as an imperial confederation would appear to be a far greater consideration in the minds of Soviet "decision-makers" than Dallin and Breslauer's model suggests.

Dissenters and nationality groupings in the U.S.S.R. and in sections of Eastern Europe are physically left alone so long as their words and actions do not appear to threaten the security of Soviet tenure. Whenever the tenure of Soviet rule appears to be challenged, there is a reversion to that proven, inhibiting quality: terror. It is very hard to relate this motivation to Dallin and Breslauer's "stages of development."

The statement that "the regime [of the U.S.S.R.] and society now tend toward a 'substantial consensus'" [p. 82] lacks sufficient empirical justification. In the context of the discussion of the characteristics of post-mobilization, it asserts a direct rational relationship between the uses of terror, stages of growth, and goals. However, apart from footnoted reference to structural-functionalist, systems-analysis, and other sociological writings, it remains unverified. The statement may be true; but *that* is not the point. Those who claim the mantle of empirical scholarship are bound by their own canons empirically to justify what they say.

Therefore, and despite the authors' constant and conscientious strictures against oversimplifications and their warnings against attributing rational purpose to irrational actions, taken as a whole, the work suffers badly from those very faults.

The authors persistently attribute mechanistic rationality to the "terror-mobilization" equation. When it is not used on a mass scale, as in Yugoslavia, it is said to have been due to rational decisionmaking relating to stages of economic and social development (why not attribute it to the personality of the leader and to circumstance?). When it is used on a mass scale, as in Stalinist Russia, it is said to have been rational in design if not always in practice.

Like all systematizers, Dallin and Breslauer rely almost exclusively on historical hindsight for the construction of their model. They write about recent and contemporary events as if all the evidence were extant to warrant the conclusion that

in the Soviet Union, the longevity of the regime itself contributed to its survival; there had been time for the routinization of behavior and the reinforcing ritualization of belief, essentially an acceptance of official norms of conduct [p. 93].

Surely it is far too early to pass such judgment in such tones of fin-

ality. Is a half-century all that long in the lifetime of a political system? Has there been such a highly ordered and rational chain of purpose linking the various Soviet regimes from Lenin to that of the present?

An over-reliance on hindsight leads the authors to posit the following:

In retrospect, it seems probable . . . that with a good deal of advance preparation in terms of investments, agronomic assistance, imports, and organizational development a viable cooperative sector [of the economy] could have been created in the Soviet countryside, without extreme coercion, much less terror [p. 76].

If this *had* happened, the Dallin-Breslauer model would take on more validity; but, unfortunately for their systematizing, it ignores the reality of the economic fantasies both of the early Bolsheviks and of Stalin. Nevertheless, the statement is tantamount to an implicit acceptance by the authors of the impossibility of their attempt to view the course of Soviet development within a preconceived framework, one that is insufficient to deal with the complexities and confusions of the vital period of their model—the mobilization/transformation stage, the period of Stalin's apocalyptic rule. Subscription to the developmental model similarly colors the authors' image of the future course of Soviet politics and economics:

If economic growth and the development of political institutions remain among the priority goals of the regime, logically a certain decrease in the level of coercion and perhaps in the integrating role of Communist organization and ideology should follow. But this is a dilemma Stalin left unsolved along with other problems he bequeathed to his successors [p. 78].

The case rests too heavily on the conjunction, *if*. *If* Stalin had a logical plan, *if* the leadership thought in structural/functionalist-systems analysis terms, then the authors would have a plausible case. As pointed out above, *if* we are to rely heavily on the literature of Solzhenitsyn, the Medvedevs, Mandelstam, Ginsberg and others, then such hypothetical projections can be said to be based more on the logic of an argument than on empirical evidence. *If* the cessation of the draconian terror was motivated primarily by a commonly held desire to live free of fear and suspicion, then present Soviet policies can be explained in terms of delicate "holding" operations rather than development and growth. It is important to ask if the process of development outlined by Dallin and Breslauer ceases to exist once the post-mobilization

stage has been reached. If it does, then has Communism been achieved? ² When can it be said that *that* stage has been reached? For instance, with regard to relations between Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the U.S.S.R., it would be argued that this relationship is characterized, from the U.S.S.R.'s position, by a mobilization syndrome. This is because the Soviet government has a vested interest in curtailing economic growth rates in those countries for political reasons. If the East European economies were to develop independently of the U.S.S.R. and were thereby to boom, the dramatic increase in prosperity would bear testimony to Soviet citizens of the failings of the Soviet economy, which, in large measure, have been caused by acts of political terror unrelated to programs of development and growth. This would have the political effect of increasing dissatisfaction with the regime's performance, thereby magnifying its difficulties in establishing and internalizing its legitimacy among the populace of the U.S.S.R.

And just what is one to make of these tautologies?

- (i) China's experience was different from that of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, for its economy, which was less developed, could simply not have sustained the profound dislocation that Soviet-style collectivization and industrialization produced [p. 79].
- (ii) . . . the mobilization process in China has proved to be more protracted and less successful, partly for objective reasons and partly as a consequence of the particular mobilization strategy pursued [p. 80].

To say that the patterns of development and mobilization in China are different from similar processes in Russia and Eastern Europe because the social and economic conditions are different, and because different strategies have been pursued, is to say everything and nothing.

The inadequacies of the methodology, the retrospection, the attribution of a continuity of rational purpose to a succession of Communist regimes, and the circumlocutory qualities of the language and the argument are exquisitely encapsuled in this one paragraph:

The changes relevant to the fate of political terror are outcomes, either desired or unintended, of the prior forced-modernization

2. This is an important question as it relates to the model. If Dallin and Breslauer answer in the affirmative, there is an implication that their model of development implicitly endorses Marxist-Leninist interpretations of Communist societies. It also confirms one's suspicions that their methodology is perhaps more strongly influenced by Marxian residues than would at first appear.

process or of earlier policy choices. Thus, at the mobilization stage, the elite aims at a fundamental transformation of socio-economic relations and of individual human nature, whereas at the post-mobilization stage it tends to realize that economic development has become increasingly self-sustaining and no longer dependent on inefficient coercive mobilization. Finally, whatever its rhetoric, the elite tends in practice to end up neglecting or ignoring other transformation objectives previously accepted as ideologically "given." One may posit, moreover, that all industrial societies tend to require or ultimately generate a stable matrix of role expectations [p. 82].

There are at least five points of criticism to be raised here. First, the complex motivations underlying the official uses of terror and their consequences are merged under the categories "desired" and "unintended," as if the distinction was irrelevant to assessments of the functional consequences of the uses of terror. If the "mobilizing" terror is "desired," then it becomes difficult for a successor regime to claim the mantle of legitimacy bequeathed by its immediate predecessors. This is because it is confronted with the difficulty of dissociating itself from the worst aspects of the past without denying the legitimacy of the predecessor's rule. On the other hand, if the terror is "unintended," the successor regime can more easily and quite legitimately dissociate itself from the terror of the past. The present rulers of the U.S.S.R. cannot easily dissociate themselves from the Stalinist terror because most of them were intricately involved in its conduct. This is not an economic problem.

Second, in the space of one paragraph the histories of four successive regimes are summarized in an extraordinarily mechanistic fashion, the arbitrary divisions in the developmental model being used to coincide retroactively with the changeovers in leadership from Lenin to Stalin, and from Stalin to his heirs. Given this scheme, how would the authors cope with the rise of another "Stalin" in the U.S.S.R.?

Third, cast in the role of the great mobilizer, can it be so easily said of Stalin that he was deeply committed to concepts of effecting a fundamental transformation of individual human nature? With considerable justification, this could be said of the revolutionary romantics, of Lunarcharsky, even of Trotsky and Bukharin; but one needs substantial evidence to accept the description in Stalin's case.

Fourth, there is, in the last sentence, the inevitable (to systematizers) slide from the particular to the universal, proclaimed in such categorical, sociological terms that one must either accept or reject the proposition. There is no provision for agnosticism.

Fifth, as mentioned above, the language and arguments are circumlocutory and the analysis crudely retrospective.

In discussing the impact of terror "on the political processes," the authors make the following statement, which can be most aptly described as a "howler":

The harmful impact of terror in [sic] the international standing of Communist polities also requires no elaboration. Both Russia in the 1930's and China in the 1960's suffered in prestige and influence as a consequence of their domestic purges [p. 130].

This is nonsense. The international prestige of the Soviet Union among reputable, opinion-forming Western academics and literary figures had never been so high as it was during the period of Stalin's rule. Paradoxically, the international prestige of the Soviet Union has declined since the death of Stalin. As for China, it hardly needs to be emphasized in this forum that the prestige of the Chinese Communist regime has never been so high as it is today, despite recent revelations about the conduct of terror campaigns during the period of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Whatever the reasons, the authors are plainly wrong in their assessments.

One final criticism. In comparing the relative degrees of terror employed in China and the U.S.S.R., Dallin and Breslauer argue that, on the basis of émigré reports, terror has been given greater weight as a point of objection to life under Communism by Russian and Eastern European sources than it has been by Chinese sources. To support their argument, they refer in some detail to Khrushchev's revelations and to the writings of Andrei Sakharov, and point to the fact that there are few comparable Chinese writings and statements. They conclude from this that terror in Communist China has never reached horrific proportions [pp. 129-133].

Once again, we are confronted with hasty judgments.

True, existing evidence does indicate that terror in Communist China has never reached the apocalyptic proportions of the Stalinist terror in Russia. It would also appear to be true that the Chinese regime has placed far greater emphases on socialization and propaganda campaigns than have any of the Russian Communist regimes. However, categorical judgments about the *degree* and *nature* of Communist terror in China should be withheld until more evidence and documents become available.

In the event of Mao's death, an elite group contending for power could conceivably prosecute a "de-Mao-ization" campaign. In the course of such a campaign, one could reasonably expect a flowering

of literature and other documents purporting to reveal the extent of the "crimes" of the cult of personality. The role of the Western researcher would then be that of sifting and cross-checking the evidence in order to establish its validity. Careful scholarship requires a certain degree of patience, which can be exercised only in time and space.